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What the Feeling Is About: Emotion and Appraisal among Shenzhen Residents Hosting Hong Kong Visitors

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Abstract: Travel between Hong Kong and Shenzhen reversed direction after quarantine-free passage resumed in 2023, turning former guests into hosts. Research on residents' emotions has focused on favourability and closeness, while tourism appraisal research has focused on tourists' experiences. The objects and stated causes of residents' emotions in particular encounters remain underexamined. This study examines what Shenzhen residents' emotions about Hong Kong visitors concern, how residents explain them, and how they describe and justify their conduct. It analyses 38 semi-structured interviews conducted near the border and in three commercial districts in January and February 2026 by coding emotion, object, stated cause and linked conduct. Emotions concerned trade, shared space, residents' standing, earlier treatment in Hong Kong and visitors' circumstances. Indifference reflected low personal relevance. One resident accepted a visitor-only discount as business; another read it as demotion. Cold service was interpreted as haste or refusal depending on the cause assigned. Conduct included mall withdrawal, maintained courtesy and explicit non-retaliation; hospitality as a personal duty appeared in two accounts. The study shows that favourable impressions of visitors can coexist with unfavourable evaluations of specific effects. Linking emotions to their objects and stated causes extends favourability-based research in a host population that recently occupied the guest position and directs urban management towards concrete arrangements rather than assumed shared attitudes.

Keywords: Emotion; Appraisal; Host-guest Relations; Cross-border Tourism; Shenzhen; Hong Kong.

1. Introduction

Quarantine-free travel between Hong Kong and Shenzhen resumed in early 2023, and the flow of people across that border turned around. Shenzhen checkpoints recorded more than 77 million entries by Hong Kong residents in 2024, against 38 million entries by mainland residents into Hong Kong [1]. Northbound spending in Guangdong reached an estimated HK$55.7 billion, some HK$20 billion above the level of 2023, and 95 per cent of surveyed Hong Kong respondents reported more than one visit in the period [2]. At the Liantang market, Hong Kong customers now account for more than half of the footfall [3]. For two decades the movement had run the other way, and the residents who now receive visitors were themselves the visitors.

Research on what residents make of these visits has concentrated on favourability. Surveys ask residents whether they support tourism development, how close they feel to visitors, or how they would rate a group on a set of attributes [4,5,6]. These instruments answer a question about degree, and they answer it well. They do not answer a question about content: when a resident says he is annoyed, or that he does not mind, or that something is not fair, what is the emotion about? A resident can welcome the trade, resent the blocked road and feel demoted by a discount in the same week, and a single favourability score will record none of these separately.

The distinction matters more where the encounter is short, commercial and reversible. Contact across a counter assigns roles, limits duration and supplies a script, and the same encounter can be read in several ways depending on what the resident takes it to be. Appraisal research has established that emotions follow from evaluations of an event rather than from the event itself, and that the evaluation fixes both the emotion and its object [7,8]. That body of work has been applied to tourists, whose emotions concern a trip that is going well or badly [9,10]. Research on residents has taken a different route, measuring how favourable residents are rather than what their emotions are about.

Three questions organise the analysis, and each one concerns a part of the emotional episode. Which emotions do residents describe when they talk about Hong Kong visitors, and what is each emotion directed at? What do residents treat as the cause of these emotions, and how does that reading vary between residents? How do residents describe their own conduct towards Hong Kong visitors, and how do they justify it? The data are 38 semi-structured interviews conducted in Shenzhen in January and February 2026, coded for emotion, object, stated cause and action.

The study makes three contributions to research on host–guest relations. It records what residents' emotions are about, and shows that the object is frequently the relation rather than the group. It identifies appraisal as the step that decides which emotion an event produces, and locates language competence as one condition that shapes the appraisal. It documents a host population that was recently a guest population, which is a position the literature on host–guest emotion has not described.

2. Literature Review

Two lines of research bear on the question. One comes from social psychology and asks how an event turns into an emotion. The other comes from tourism and asks how residents evaluate the visitors who arrive. The two have developed apart, and the space between them is where this study sits.

2.1. How an Event Becomes an Emotion

Through the 1980s a group of studies stopped treating emotion as a direct response to a stimulus and began recording how people evaluate the event that produced it. Smith and Ellsworth [7] asked participants to recall episodes of anger, fear, sadness, guilt and several other emotions, and to rate each episode on a set of dimensions that included pleasantness, certainty, attentional activity and who was held responsible. The ratings separated the emotions, and the separation rested on a few dimensions rather than on all of them. Anger and fear, for instance, differed in certainty and in whether another person was held responsible. Emotion, on this account, is not carried by the event but by the reading of the event.

The structure was tested again with a larger set of emotions. Roseman, Spindel and Jose [11] presented participants with emotion-eliciting situations and asked them to rate the appraisals that a structural theory specified, among them the person's motivational state, the probability of an outcome and its legitimacy. Each emotion carried a recognisable pattern, and the patterns were distinguishable from one another. Work in the following decade turned from description to causation. Roseman and Evdokas [12] manipulated appraisals in an experiment and found that the corresponding emotions followed, which supports the order the theory assumes rather than the reverse. Studies of everyday episodes reached a similar conclusion from the other direction, in that people in the same kind of situation report different emotions and the differences track their appraisals rather than the situation [13]. Reviews of the field agree on the causal claim and record disagreement about process, including whether appraisal runs in sequence or in parallel and how much of it is deliberate [8].

Three of these appraisals carry most of the weight in what follows [7,11]. Relevance decides what the event is taken to be about, and therefore what the emotion is directed at. Agency, which is the question of who or what produced the event, distinguishes causes located in oneself, another person or circumstances [7,11]. Legitimacy, which is the question of whether an outcome is deserved, shapes the judgement that an arrangement is fair or unfair [11]. An account that recorded only valence and arousal would place two residents at the same point while one is annoyed by a blocked road and the other is stung by a discount given to someone else. The object is what appraisal adds to a description of feeling.

Because appraisal is verbal, an interview can reach it. Participants in the present study were not asked to score dimensions, and they were asked what they made of Hong Kong visitors instead, which left them to supply the reasons. The analysis treats those reasons as the appraisal.

2.2. Appraisal in Tourism Research

Tourism research came to appraisal by way of measurement. Hosany and Gilbert [14] developed a scale for tourists' emotional responses to destinations and settled on three dimensions, joy, love and positive surprise, which later work on satisfaction and loyalty took up. A measure of what tourists feel made the next question askable, namely where those feelings come from. Hosany [9] put appraisal dimensions into the same design and found that pleasantness, goal congruence and self-compatibility predicted the three emotions, with canonical correlation used to relate the two sets of variables.

Ma, Gao, Scott and Ding [10] tested the framework at a larger scale by collecting 645 questionnaires from tourists leaving a theme park and using structural equation modelling. They identified four appraisal dimensions behind delight, and more than one combination of those dimensions reached the same emotion, which corrected an assumption in the earlier delight literature that surprise was the necessary ingredient. Prayag, Hosany and Odeh [15] then followed the emotions forward, connecting them to satisfaction and from there to intentions to recommend and to return.

The designs share a premise, in that appraisal items are written in advance from dimensions established in earlier work and respondents rate them. This holds where the analyst knows which appraisals are likely to matter. It holds less well at the start of a new setting, where the relevant appraisal has not been identified and a closed list may collect agreement with the researcher's vocabulary rather than the respondent's.

Two features of this literature also limit what it can say about residents. The subject is the tourist and the object of appraisal is the trip, so no study in this group asks what a resident appraises when a visitor arrives, although the resident is the other party to the same encounter. The emotion vocabulary is hedonic as well. Joy, love and positive surprise describe an experience that is going well, and the set has little room for annoyance at a blocked road, indifference to a crowd, or the feeling of ranking second in one's own city.

2.3. What Residents Feel

Research on the resident side built its own instruments, and emotion entered them in three forms, each from a different source.

The first came from sociology, where emotional solidarity, adapted from Durkheim, treats residents and visitors as bound by welcoming nature, emotional closeness and sympathetic understanding [16]. Woosnam and Norman [5] turned the three into a scale, and the scale records how close a resident feels to visitors as a quantity that can be scored and compared across destinations.

The second came from the attitudes literature. A review of 140 articles published between 1984 and 2010 found social exchange the dominant explanatory frame and quantitative designs the dominant method, with limited theoretical movement across the period [4]. The outcome of interest there is support for tourism development, and emotion appears mainly as a component of perceived impact rather than as a subject in its own right.

The third came from psychophysiology, and it recorded expression as well as report. Zhang, Chen and Hsu [17] showed Hong Kong residents video vignettes of visitors and recorded facial expressions alongside self-reports. The two channels diverged, in that faces carried emotions tied to what the residents wanted, such as happiness, sadness and anger, while words carried emotions tied to stereotypes, disgust in particular. For a study that works from words, the finding is a caution, because what residents say about visitors is filtered and part of the filter is the stereotype itself.

Three studies come close to the present problem. Chen, Hsu and Li [18] interviewed 39 Hong Kong residents about mainland visitors and found unfavourable attitudes outnumbering neutral and favourable ones. The accounts carried two mentalities at once, a sense of superiority and a feeling of deprivation, which the authors organised into a loop of social categorisation, identification and comparison. Tse and Tung [6] moved from one city to three countries and connected the constructs, showing that four stereotype dimensions elicited admiration or contempt and that those

emotions mediated residents' facilitative or harmful behaviour. Tan and Hsu [19] supplied the step before that with an explanatory sequential design, in which interaction raised emotional solidarity, solidarity lowered negative stereotypes, and language barriers and cultural differences weakened the chain.

The emotions used in these studies are defined by the group. Admiration and contempt are what the stereotype content model assigns to warmth and competence [20], so a resident who is annoyed by a blocked road or by a discount reserved for someone else has no emotion in the set, and the cause of whatever he does report is not recorded. This is where the present study departs, since it keeps the object and the cause attached to the emotion instead of assigning the emotion to the group in advance.

2.4. The Gap

The two lines leave a step out. The psychology of appraisal describes how an event becomes an emotion and treats the object as part of the process. Research on residents measures how favourable residents are or how close they feel, and stops before that process begins. The result is a literature that can say whether residents welcome visitors and cannot say what, specifically, they are reacting to.

The omission matters more in some settings than others. Where the encounter is brief, commercial and organised around a counter, residents may hold several emotions at once about different things, including the trade the visitors bring, the road they block, the discount they receive and the treatment the residents themselves were given elsewhere. A design that codes valence alone will merge these into a single score and lose the distinction that carries the argument.

The direction of this border adds a second reason to look. Hong Kong residents have been the hosts in this literature since the Individual Visit Scheme, and their attitudes and emotions towards mainland visitors are well documented [6,18]. Shenzhen residents became hosts when quarantine-free travel resumed in 2023, and no study reports what they feel or what those feelings are about.

Figure 1 summarises this logic: appraisal research supplies the event-to-emotion mechanism, resident research describes group-level responses, and the present study connects them through the object, stated cause and conduct of residents' emotion episodes. Three questions follow from the missing step and from the direction this border has taken.

RQ1 Which emotions do residents describe when they talk about Hong Kong visitors, and what is each emotion directed at?

RQ2 What do residents treat as the cause of these emotions, and how does that reading vary between residents?

RQ3 How do residents describe their own conduct towards Hong Kong visitors, and how do they justify it?

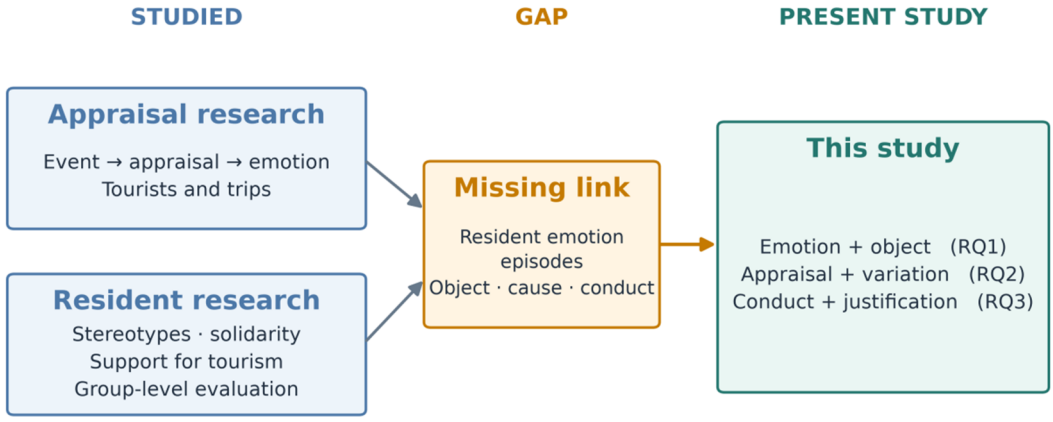

Figure 1. Research framework

3. Method

3.1. A Qualitative Design for an Encounter in Motion

The study examines a relation that changed direction three years before the fieldwork, and the accounts were collected while residents could still compare the present with the arrangement they remembered. A qualitative design suits a phenomenon that is recent, spatially concentrated and poorly documented. Hong Kong shopping in Shenzhen appears in a handful of districts near checkpoints and in a few retail centres, and the residents who receive visitors are the same people who travelled in the other direction a few years earlier. The analysis follows the procedures of grounded theory, with initial coding of each transcript, focused coding into categories, constant comparison across accounts and memos recording analytic decisions [21].

Interviews were chosen over a questionnaire because the study needs the vocabulary residents use and the reasons they give. A questionnaire supplies its own terms and records agreement with them, which is a poor instrument for a question about what an emotion is about. Interviews also allow a participant to move between an impression, an episode and a comparison within one answer, and that movement is where the reason for a feeling becomes visible.

3.2. Sites, Participants and the Shape of the Sample

Recruitment covered four kinds of site, chosen for different exposure to Hong Kong visitors. Shekou and Sea World in Nanshan form a leisure district away from the land crossings, where visitors buy food and eat. The Futian checkpoint area carries the heaviest traffic. Huangbeiling in Luohu is an older residential and market district near the Luohu crossing. The Uniwalk and Lijiang City malls in Bao'an draw families. Interviewers approached people in shops, restaurants, markets and public space, explained the study and interviewed on the spot when the person agreed. Sampling was purposive and sought variety in occupation, age and prior time in Hong Kong.

Thirty-eight residents took part, and the sample leaned toward people who met visitors at work. Eighteen worked in shops, restaurants or other service settings, or ran small businesses in the district where they were interviewed. Seven held professional or managerial posts, including two estate agents, a dentist, an entrepreneur and a university teacher. Three were students or retired, and the remaining ten were interviewed in public space and did not give an occupation. Fieldwork ran over ten days between 13 January and 2 February 2026, and the busiest day, 18 January at the Futian checkpoint, produced nine interviews.

3.3. The Interview

Interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, were recorded with consent and were transcribed in full. The guide had four open questions, each followed by probes: what impression the participant had of Hong Kong people; what visitors did and where they spent time; how the participant viewed the visits and any effect on daily life; and what they would suggest to the city. Probes asked whether the participant had been to Hong Kong and how they had been received there. The guide asked for descriptions rather than for ratings or labels. Questions about impression came before questions about frequency and effect, and the closing question invited participants to say whether they viewed the visits as welcome, neutral or unwelcome.

3.4. Coding Emotion Episodes

The unit of analysis is the emotion episode, defined as a stretch of talk in which a participant names a feeling, evaluates a situation in affective terms or describes conduct connected with that feeling. Each episode was coded for four things: the emotion, its object, the cause the participant gave, and any conduct the participant described, intended or explicitly ruled out. The conduct field used one label, "no specific conduct reported," when an episode contained no linked action statement. This label records the content of the interview and carries no further analytic distinction. Coding was done in Mandarin, and initial coding stayed close to the participants' wording. Focused coding then grouped episodes by object rather than by valence, because the same object carried different emotions and the same emotion attached to different objects.

A second coder checked consistency across a subset of the transcripts. She holds a PhD in tourism management, had conducted none of the interviews and worked from the Mandarin transcripts. She coded 18 of the 38 independently against the final frame, applying the same rule on episodes, and agreement reached 92 per cent of coded segments, and disagreements were resolved by discussion.

3.5. Locating Appraisal in What Participants Said

The analysis does not infer appraisals from tone. It takes three steps, and each step uses material the participant supplied.

The first step locates the emotion, using feeling words, affective evaluations and reported actions. The second step locates the reason, which is the explanation the participant gives in the same passage for why the feeling arose. T24, for example, says that what a mainland visitor experiences in Hong Kong as discrimination is a matter of communication, and the causal claim is hers rather than the analyst's. The third step locates normative wording, such as what one should or should not do, which marks the appraisal of legitimacy. T04 says that doing business is like this and that a customer who comes is a guest, and the sentence carries both an object, which is the transaction, and a norm.

Where a participant gave no reason or no norm, the corresponding appraisal remained unassigned. Table 1 summarises the coding rules and the evidence accepted for each field; no appraisal was supplied on the participant's behalf.

Table 1. Coding rules for emotion episodes and appraisals

Analytic field	Question applied to the account	Evidence accepted	Example from the interviews
Emotion and object	What is felt, and what is it about?	Feeling words, affective evaluations or conduct linked to a feeling	Feeling demoted by visitor-only discounts (T34)
Relevance	Why does the event matter to the speaker?	Effects on work, routine, resources, identity or personal standing	Restaurant queues affect meals near home (T15)
Agency	Who or what does the speaker treat as the cause?	An explanation or responsibility assigned in the same passage	The mall's allocation rather than the visitors (T34)
Legitimacy	Does the speaker treat the outcome as deserved or fair?	Normative wording such as should, unfair or discrimination	Being a second-class citizen in one's own city (T34)
Conduct account	What action, non-retaliation or reason is linked to the episode?	Reported conduct, explicit rejection of retaliation or a stated justification	Stopped using the mall (T34); rejected retaliation (T02)
No linked action statement	Does the episode contain no action linked to the feeling?	A single missing-report label, with no inferred restraint	No specific conduct reported

Note. Appraisals were coded only when participants supplied the relevant evaluation. Unmentioned fields were left unassigned

3.6. Language, Translation and the Standing of the Accounts

Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, with Cantonese and English words appearing where participants used them. Quotations were translated by the first author and checked against the recordings, and a term is glossed where translation would flatten it. Baishuhua, or Cantonese, is kept as a category because participants treated the ability to speak it as a boundary between being served and being ignored.

The interviewers were Shenzhen residents, and some participants knew them as staff or as regular customers. That eased access and may also have softened criticism of a group standing in the same room. The accounts are read as talk produced in a particular setting, not as opinion polled in private.

Participation was voluntary, participants heard the purpose of the study and gave verbal consent before recording began, and names, shop names and street-level locations are withheld. Codes run from T01 to T38 in the order in which transcripts

were produced, and no quotation appears in a form that would let a colleague or a regular customer identify the speaker.

4. Findings

4.1. Five Objects and Low Personal Relevance

The first research question concerns what residents felt and what each feeling concerned. Grouping the episodes by object gives a clearer answer than grouping them by positive or negative valence. The same participant could welcome spending, dislike congestion and remain indifferent to visitors' opinions of Shenzhen. These statements referred to different parts of the encounter. Table 2 summarises six recurrent patterns: five have a specific object, and indifference marks low personal relevance.

Table 2. Emotion episodes organised by object, stated cause and reported conduct

Emotion or affective response	Object	Cause given by the participant	Reported conduct	Illustrative accounts
Welcome	Trade and custom	Visitors bring business and are received as customers	No specific conduct reported	T04, T10, T23
Indifference	No specific object	The visits have little bearing on the speaker's life or identity	No specific conduct reported	T04, T23, T37, T38
Annoyance	Roads, queues and restaurant space	Crowding, coach traffic and competition for tables	Courtesy maintained in service encounters (T20)	T15, T20
Feeling demoted	Residents' standing in the city	Visitor-only discounts create unequal treatment	Stopped using the mall	T34
Hurt or resentment	Earlier treatment in Hong Kong	Cold service is attributed to language differences, haste or hostile intent	Non-retaliation stated in some accounts	T01, T14, T35, T36, T37
Sympathy and respect	Visitors' working lives	Relaxed behaviour in Shenzhen prompts inferences about pressure at home	No specific conduct reported	T38

Note. Accounts are numbered as in the interview record and illustrate rather than exhaust each pattern. "No specific conduct reported" is used consistently when the episode contains no linked action statement. It does not denote a separate type of response

Welcome was commonly tied to trade. A grocery owner said, "Doing business is just like this; a customer who comes is a guest, right?" (T04). The reason concerned the transaction: a customer brought business and therefore deserved reception. A Sea World volunteer also linked the visits to better business, while separately noting that local prices had risen (T10). The two judgements referred to separate effects. The first evaluated the custom visitors brought, and the second evaluated a cost associated with their presence. T23 likewise welcomed the spending while saying that the visits did not affect her daily life. These accounts support a specific conclusion: welcome can express approval of trade without implying emotional closeness to visitors.

Indifference also had identifiable grounds. T04 said that the visits had not affected daily life. T37 treated cross-border shopping as a rational choice made in response to prices and opportunities, summarised as voting with one's feet. T38 said that he did not mind whether visitors saw him as a Shenzhen resident, a Greater Bay Area resident or a Chinese citizen. These statements concern different issues, but each removes a personal stake from the situation. Indifference therefore does more than mark the midpoint between welcome and rejection. It indicates that the speaker saw little in the event to appraise as personally relevant.

Annoyance arose when visits entered the resident's own routine. T15 welcomed two-way movement and its economic benefits, but also described longer restaurant queues near her home. T20, an estate agent working near the Futian checkpoint, described weekend congestion, slow movement on pavements, restaurant noise and coaches blocking the road. He also distinguished the visitors who caused these difficulties from Hong Kong property clients whom he considered polite and well educated. His account therefore combined irritation with a favourable evaluation of another group of visitors. The object of annoyance was the disruption in shared space, and his finer distinctions prevented that irritation from becoming a single judgement of all Hong Kong visitors.

Feeling demoted had a different object. T34 described visitor-only discounts as evidence of his standing in his own city: "since I am a second-class citizen here, I just don't come" (T34). The relevant event was not the visitors' presence but a merchant's allocation of benefits. He explicitly said that the visitors had done nothing wrong. His reaction concerned unequal treatment, and his decision to stop using the mall followed from that appraisal. Section 4.2 compares this account with a participant who saw the same commercial practice as harmless.

Earlier treatment in Hong Kong supplied another object. Fourteen participants mentioned discrimination at some point, usually while recalling their own visits. T37, who had lived in Hong Kong for five years, described being regarded as a poor relative from the mainland. The phrase located the feeling in an unequal relationship between the two places. It did not describe a current visitor in Shenzhen. This distinction matters because a remembered emotion can remain attached to an earlier event even when the speaker reports no hostility towards present visitors.

Sympathy and respect moved in the opposite direction, from current behaviour to an inference about visitors' lives. T38 noticed that visitors looked relaxed in Shenzhen and connected that appearance with accounts of demanding work in Hong Kong. He expressed respect for their industriousness and sympathy for the pressure he imagined they faced. His account drew on observation and second-hand information about working conditions in Hong Kong. The object was thus the visitors' circumstances as he understood them, rather than a general evaluation of their character.

4.2. One Discount, Two Readings

The discount episodes show why the object alone cannot explain an emotion. T23 and T34 described the same commercial practice, but they appraised its relevance and fairness differently. Both encountered discounts reserved for Hong Kong customers. Their accounts allow the event to remain constant while the interpretation changes.

T23 said that the practice did not make her feel unfairly treated. She described it as part of running a business and said that it left her interests and mood unaffected. Her appraisal kept the discount within the domain of commerce. She welcomed the visitors' custom, and the promotion was one way for merchants to attract it. The discount therefore carried little personal cost and produced no grievance.

T34 placed the same practice in a different domain. For him, a discount available to visitors but unavailable to local residents established a ranking. He said that he felt discriminated against in his own city and called himself a second-class citizen. This appraisal concerned legitimacy and standing, not the monetary value of the discount. He described his reaction as moderate and recognised the merchant's commercial motive. He nevertheless judged the arrangement to be wrong because of what it implied about residents.

The contrast separates the event from its emotional meaning. T23 evaluated a promotion that brought mutual benefit. T34 evaluated an allocation that placed visitors above residents. Agency also differed in its consequence. T34 located responsibility in the local arrangement rather than in the visitors, so his avoidance targeted the mall rather than Hong Kong people. The two accounts show that emotional variation lies in what the practice is taken to mean and who is held responsible for it.

4.3. Language and Attributed Intent in Recalled Treatment

Accounts of cold service in Hong Kong show a second form of divergent appraisal. The relevant difference was the cause assigned to the service encounter. Some participants treated speed and communication as sufficient explanations. Others treated the same behaviour as evidence of unwillingness or hostility.

T24, who spoke Cantonese, said that she had not felt discriminated against and attributed the difficulty to communication. T33 also described good treatment and linked service to Hong Kong's faster pace. T38 called the service cold but said that staff responded quickly when asked. He interpreted the lack of warmth as commercial efficiency and hurry. These explanations limited the relevance of the encounter to the service setting. They did not require an inference about the server's attitude towards mainland visitors as a group.

Other participants assigned intent to the behaviour. T01 described teachers who received no answer when they asked for directions in Mandarin, while her own limited Cantonese helped her obtain service. T35 sensed an unwillingness to deal with her, and T36 described impatience when a shop assistant saw her suitcase. Here the conduct signalled refusal rather than speed. The emotion followed that attribution: participants reported hurt, discomfort or a lasting sense of humiliation.

T15 added a further distinction. She recalled that a Cantonese-speaking friend received good service and that sales staff responded more warmly when she used English rather than Mandarin. In this account, language did more than make communication possible. The choice of language appeared to change the customer's social position in the encounter. This observation complicates a simple division between Cantonese speakers and everyone else. Residents evaluated what a particular language signalled to the server, and that evaluation informed whether cold treatment seemed personal.

Language competence supplied one resource for choosing between these explanations. A participant who could follow or use Cantonese had more contextual information about the exchange and could attribute abruptness to pace or phrasing. A participant who relied on Mandarin had to interpret the refusal of service itself. This pattern is an association within the interview accounts, not a test of a causal effect of language ability. The analytical point is narrower and better supported: residents explained similar conduct through different causes, and those explanations changed the emotional episode.

The next issue is whether these appraisals travelled into current conduct. Several participants explicitly separated earlier treatment from their behaviour towards visitors in Shenzhen. T14 said that a shop assistant's impatience gave her no reason to pass the experience on. T02 said that she would not treat visitors badly simply because she had been treated badly. These statements introduce the role of personal justifications, which the next section examines.

Table 3 aligns the two comparison sets by what mattered to each speaker, the cause assigned and the resulting response.

Table 3. Appraisal contrasts in the discount and cold-service episodes

Episode and account	Relevance: what matters	Agency: cause assigned	Legitimacy-related wording	Reported response
Discount (T23)	Commercial benefit with no personal cost	The merchant's promotion	No unfairness stated	No grievance; trade welcomed
Discount (T34)	Equal standing as a local resident	The local mall's arrangement	The difference judged undeserved	Feeling demoted; stopped using the mall
Cold service (T24, T33, T38)	Service pace and completion	Communication, haste or commercial efficiency	No claim of undeserved treatment	Understanding or a mild reaction
Cold service (T01, T35, T36)	Refusal of service or assistance	Another person's unwillingness or hostile intent	Treatment described as discriminatory or disrespectful	Hurt, discomfort or lasting humiliation

Note. The table records only evaluations present in the cited accounts. It does not infer an appraisal that a participant did not state.

4.4. Reported Conduct and Individual Justifications

The third research question concerns conduct and the reasons participants gave for it. The clearest action report came from T34, who stopped using a mall after feeling demoted by its discounts. T20 described a different combination: he expressed strong irritation at congestion and noise but said that, as a service worker, he returned courtesy when visitors were courteous. T14 and T02 rejected retaliation after recalling unfavourable treatment in Hong Kong. These examples show that emotion and conduct were

linked, but the link depended on the object and on the reason the speaker considered relevant.

Two participants justified welcome through a personal moral obligation. T23 said that she represented Shenzhen and the mainland when dealing with visitors. For her, conducting herself well included being hospitable, giving directions and helping visitors feel at home. T15 said that she should receive visitors in a more civil manner than mainland visitors had sometimes been received in Hong Kong. In her account, better treatment would demonstrate the friendliness of the city. Both speakers used normative language to explain their own conduct.

These are individual justifications, not evidence of a rule shared by all Shenzhen residents. T04 gave a commercial reason for receiving customers, T37 described her current response as separate from earlier experiences, and T38 offered help when it did not greatly inconvenience him. The corpus therefore contains several rationales for welcome or non-retaliation. Hospitality as a duty is one of them. Treating it as a citywide code would extend two participants' statements beyond the evidence.

The scope of these justifications also differs. T23 described a broad obligation because she saw herself as representing the city and the mainland. T38 described bounded assistance: he would help with something that cost little time, but would not reorganise his own activities around a visitor. T37 grounded her response in a personal standard that remained stable across the direction of travel. These accounts show variation in what residents considered their responsibility. They provide no single threshold for hospitable conduct and no common rule governing every encounter.

The contrast between T34 and the two duty accounts also clarifies the role of norms. T23 and T15 described obligations that governed their own treatment of visitors. T34 made a normative claim about how merchants should treat residents. The first two concerned the conduct of a host; the third concerned fair standing within the city. Keeping these claims separate prevents a general language of hospitality from obscuring the specific judgement that produced his withdrawal.

4.5. Limited Anger and Rejected Pride

Anger was confined to one sustained account. T20 connected his irritation to concrete disruptions near the checkpoint and to the behaviour of some coach drivers and tour participants. He also compared the situation with earlier complaints about mainland visitors in Hong Kong. That comparison supplied an interpretive frame in which residents' resources were now being occupied. The emotion nevertheless remained tied to particular incidents and groups of visitors. His favourable comments about Hong Kong property clients and his support for the economic benefits of cross-border movement appeared in the same interview.

Pride did not appear as a reported emotion. T25 rejected it when the interviewer asked whether the reversed flow created a sense of achievement. The participant said that pride would require direct personal experience. Earlier visits to Hong Kong had been ordinary, and current visitors had offered no personal recognition that could create a strong contrast. This answer explains the absence in appraisal terms. The reversal lacked the personal relevance needed to support pride in that account.

These negative and low-frequency cases define the scope of the findings. Strong emotion appeared around obstruction and unequal treatment, while many descriptions of visitors remained mild or favourable. The interviews provide no basis for estimating how often anger or pride occurs among Shenzhen residents. They do show that the reversed host–guest relationship did not, by itself, supply a sufficient explanation for either emotion.

5. Discussion

5.1. Emotion Objects Extend Beyond the Visitor Group

The first research question asked which emotions residents described and what those emotions concerned. The findings show that group impressions and emotion episodes performed different analytic work. Participants often described Hong Kong visitors as polite, orderly or family oriented. Their emotions, however, frequently concerned what the visits changed: business, access to space, residents' standing or a remembered relationship. Group characteristics therefore remained present in the accounts, but they did not account for the full range of emotion objects.

This result supports an object-sensitive account of emotion. Emotions are directed at events and relationships that people appraise as significant, so a description of valence alone leaves out what gives the emotion its meaning [22]. In this study, calling T34's response "negative" would omit his judgement that a local merchant had ranked visitors above residents. Calling T20's response "negative" would omit the road, the queue and the particular coach practices he described. The object identifies the issue that the resident is evaluating and clarifies what a change in that situation would involve.

An object-sensitive account also complements existing approaches to resident emotion. Emotional solidarity measures closeness and welcome between residents and tourists [5,16]. Stereotype research links judgements of warmth and competence to group-directed emotions and behavioural tendencies [6,20]. The present analysis begins earlier in the episode by asking which feature of the encounter became emotionally relevant. It can therefore retain group impressions while separating them from feelings about trade, congestion or local treatment.

This separation resolves the apparent inconsistency within individual interviews. T10 welcomed business but disliked higher prices. T15 welcomed two-way exchange but disliked queues. T20 supported the economic benefits of the visits while expressing irritation at specific disruptions. Each statement had its own object. A single favourability score would combine these evaluations, whereas the episode-based analysis preserves their distinct referents.

The reversed host–guest relationship gains significance through the same mechanism. Reversal did not produce a single emotion directed at Hong Kong visitors. It supplied a background against which residents evaluated particular events. For T25, the reversal lacked the personal experience needed for pride. For T37, earlier treatment remained relevant as a memory. For T23, current custom and self-representation were more relevant. The setting thus shapes the available objects of emotion without dictating one response.

5.2. Appraisal Explains Variation within the Same Kind of Event

The second research question concerned the causes residents gave and the variation between their readings. The

discount and cold-service episodes provide two comparisons. In each comparison, the broad event remained similar while its appraisal changed. This is the pattern predicted by accounts in which relevance, agency and legitimacy shape discrete emotional responses [7,11,13].

The discount comparison primarily concerns relevance and legitimacy. T23 treated the discount as a commercial promotion with no personal cost. It was relevant to her work and consistent with mutual benefit. T34 treated it as a statement about equal standing. The same price distinction became illegitimate when he placed himself in the category excluded from the benefit. The emotional difference followed from that appraisal. His account also shows why agency matters: he attributed the arrangement to local commercial decisions and directed his withdrawal at the mall, not at visitors. In the terms used in Figure 2, agency refers to T34's assignment of responsibility to the mall rather than to visitors. Legitimacy refers to his judgement that the resulting difference in treatment was undeserved, even though he understood its commercial purpose.

The cold-service comparison concerns the cause assigned to another person's conduct. Explanations based on speed, commercial efficiency or communication made abrupt service intelligible. Explanations based on unwillingness or hostility made it personal. The resulting emotions differed even when the observable behaviour was similar. This supports the analysis of appraisal as the resident's interpretation of an event rather than a property contained in the event itself [7,8]. In the cold-service accounts, agency distinguishes circumstantial causes, such as pace or communication, from another person's intentional refusal.

Language competence offers a situated explanation for some of this variation. Earlier tourism research has treated language barriers as conditions that weaken the benefits of host–tourist interaction [19]. The present accounts indicate an additional interpretive role. Cantonese competence gave some residents access to the pace and phrasing of an exchange, which helped them read abruptness as haste. Other residents used the language in which service was refused as evidence of intent. Language thus entered the appraisal of an encounter after it occurred, as well as shaping the encounter itself.

This interpretation remains bounded by the data. The interviews did not measure language proficiency independently, and the number of contrasting cases is small. They demonstrate that residents used different causal explanations, not that language ability always produces a particular emotion. A test of that association would require a design that measures proficiency and appraisals separately.

5.3. Conduct Depends on the Object, While Justifications Remain Individual

The third research question concerned reported conduct and its justification. The interviews contained fewer action reports than emotion reports, and this difference should not be turned into a claim about citywide restraint. Emotion involves changes in action readiness, but overt action depends on available options, resources and judgements about costs and benefits [23]. An interview can therefore contain a clear emotion without containing an account of behaviour.

Where conduct was reported, its target often followed the object and attributed agency of the emotion. T34 avoided the mall because he objected to its allocation of discounts. He did not report avoidance of visitors. T20 described returning courtesy in service encounters even while criticising congestion and noise. T14 and T02 explicitly rejected retaliation for earlier treatment in Hong Kong. These are different forms of conduct and non-retaliation, each supported by a stated reason. Episodes without an action statement remain simply "no specific conduct reported." They do not constitute an additional behavioural category.

Hospitality as a personal duty appeared in two of these justifications. T23 linked good conduct to representing Shenzhen and the mainland, and T15 linked it to offering a better reception than she believed mainland visitors had received in Hong Kong. Their statements establish how these two participants evaluated appropriate behaviour. They do not establish a norm that all Shenzhen residents accepted or followed. Commercial interest, low personal relevance, separation of past and present, and limited inconvenience supplied other reasons in other accounts. Figure 2 summarises this relationship: appraisal links an encounter to an object-specific emotion, while the dashed link indicates a conduct account only when the participant made that connection. Reasons appear as optional parts of the account, and "no specific conduct reported" marks the absence of a linked action statement.

This distinction matters for the interpretation of welcome. A resident may welcome visitors because they bring business, because receiving them is consistent with a personal moral standard, or because the visits require no change in daily life. Measures of emotional solidarity can record the resulting welcome, but the interviews show that similar answers can rest on different appraisals [5,16]. Recording the reason for welcome helps distinguish emotional closeness from commercial acceptance and self-ascribed obligation.

The interview setting adds a further reason for caution. People regulate emotional expression according to socially endorsed display rules, and those rules vary across groups and targets [24]. The present interviews cannot identify the content or prevalence of such rules in Shenzhen. They can show that some accounts used normative language and that the interviewer's position as a local resident may have encouraged a hospitable register. This is a limitation on inference, rather than evidence for a shared hospitality norm.

5.4. Implications for Research

Three methodological consequences follow directly from the findings. First, resident-emotion studies should keep the emotion, its object and its stated cause in the same unit of analysis. A measure of valence can summarise direction, but it cannot distinguish irritation at a queue from hurt caused by remembered discrimination. The object and cause preserve that distinction and make apparently mixed evaluations intelligible.

Second, studies should distinguish an explicit decision not to act from the absence of an action report. T14 and T02 supplied reasons for non-retaliation, so their accounts contain a normative appraisal. Other episodes contained no statement about conduct. Combining these situations would create an artificial behavioural category and could lead to an unsupported claim that residents consistently suppressed their emotions. A single missing-report label avoids that problem.

Third, research at language borders should record language competence and the language used in specific encounters. The present findings suggest that these details shape both the interaction and its later interpretation. Future studies can test this possibility by linking independently measured proficiency with appraisal ratings and recalled emotion

episodes.

5.5. Implications for the City

The practical implications concern the arrangements identified in the accounts. At the Futian checkpoint, T20 located irritation in coach stopping, pavement movement and weekend congestion. T15 identified restaurant queues in a heavily used mall. These accounts support targeted management of traffic, tour-group arrival and queueing at busy periods. They do not support treating visitor volume alone as a sufficient explanation of resentment.

Visitor-only discounts raise a separate issue of perceived standing. T34 could understand the merchant's commercial motive and still object to the distinction between visitors and residents. Businesses can reduce this ambiguity by explaining eligibility and considering comparable offers for local customers. The relevant design question is how a promotion distributes recognition and benefit, in addition to how much spending it attracts.

Finally, the two accounts of hospitality as a personal duty should not become a general expectation placed on residents. Public agencies can improve the arrangements around cross-border visits through transport, information and commercial guidelines. Those measures address the objects that participants actually evaluated. They are better supported by the data than a campaign that presumes a shared emotional disposition towards Hong Kong visitors.

5.6. Limitations and Future Research

The study covers one host city during ten days of fieldwork in early 2026. The accounts describe a relationship that had already developed for three years after quarantine-free travel resumed. They cannot reconstruct the emotions of the first year, and they do not estimate the prevalence of any object or appraisal among Shenzhen residents. The sample also contains many service workers and business operators because recruitment often occurred at counters and in commercial districts. This composition helps explain the prominence of trade, but it limits comparison with residents who rarely enter those settings.

The analysis relies on interview talk. Participants knew that the interviewers were Shenzhen residents, and some already knew them. The closing question also offered welcome, neutral and unwelcome as explicit options. These features shaped the conditions in which emotion was reported. The study cannot verify private feeling during an encounter or conduct after the interview. Facial, observational or experience-sampling data would provide complementary evidence, especially because verbal reports and facial responses can diverge [17].

Visitor identification presents another limitation. Participants often recognised Hong Kong visitors through Cantonese speech, clothing, shopping bags or age, and some accounts drew on news reports or conversations with friends. These cues can support mistaken classification. The study therefore analyses how residents perceived and evaluated people they took to be Hong Kong visitors. It does not provide an independently verified record of those visitors' behaviour. This distinction is appropriate to a study of appraisal, but it limits any claim about the visitor group itself.

The language pattern requires particular caution. Cantonese competence was reconstructed from the accounts rather than assessed with an independent measure. The findings support an association between available explanations and emotional interpretation within these interviews. They do not establish that Cantonese speakers generally understand cold service or that Mandarin speakers generally experience refusal. A larger study could measure proficiency, encounter language and attributed intent separately before testing their relationships.

Future research should also examine change over time. Repeated interviews in the same districts would show whether trade, congestion and local standing retain their emotional relevance as cross-border shopping becomes routine. Comparisons with other Greater Bay Area cities would identify which objects depend on Shenzhen's border location and commercial structure. Experiments could then vary explanations for cold service or the framing of visitor discounts to test whether appraisals change in the directions suggested here.

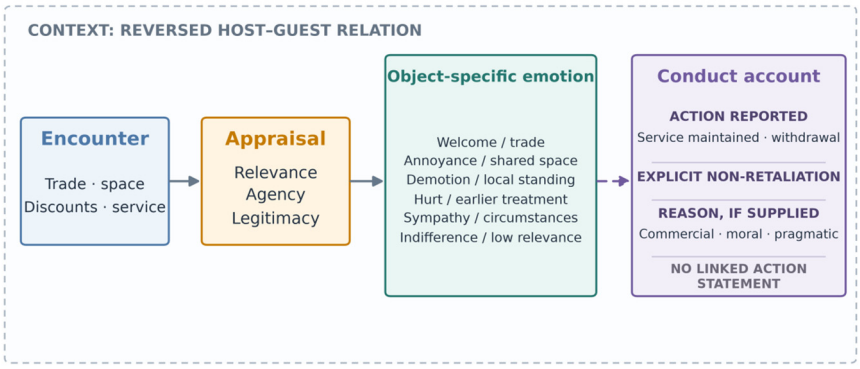

Figure 2. Object-specific appraisal framework for resident emotion and linked conduct accounts

6. Conclusion

This study examined what Shenzhen residents' emotions about Hong Kong visitors were directed at, how residents explained those emotions and how they described their own conduct. The interviews show that favourable impressions of visitors can coexist with unfavourable evaluations of particular effects because the two concern different objects. Trade, shared space, residents' standing, earlier treatment in Hong Kong and visitors' working circumstances carried the main emotion episodes. Other accounts expressed indifference because the visits had little personal relevance.

The comparisons clarify the role of appraisal. Visitor-only discounts signalled harmless commercial promotion to T23 but unequal standing to T34. Cold service in Hong Kong signalled haste or communication difficulty to some residents and refusal or hostility to others. Relevance, legitimacy and attributed agency therefore help explain why similar events

produced different emotions. Cantonese competence was one resource used in these interpretations, although the qualitative evidence does not establish a general causal effect.

Reported conduct followed a more selective pattern. T34 withdrew from a mall whose arrangement he criticised, while other participants maintained courteous service or explicitly rejected retaliation. Two participants described hospitality as a personal obligation. Their statements explain their own conduct and should not be treated as a common code for Shenzhen residents. Where an episode contained no action statement, the appropriate conclusion is simply that conduct was not reported.

The main contribution is to keep the object and stated cause attached to resident emotion. This approach shows that the reversal of host and guest roles did not produce one emotional response to Hong Kong visitors. It created a setting in which residents evaluated particular transactions, spaces, memories and distributions of treatment. Understanding those evaluations gives a more precise account of host–guest emotion than a general measure of welcome alone.

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